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Love and Grief in Confucianism and Romanticism: Comparing the Butterfly Lovers' Violin Concerto and Tchaikovsky's Romeo and Juliet

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ABSTRACT

This article provides a comparative musical analysis of Chen Gang and He Zhanhao's Butterfly Lovers' Violin Concerto and Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's Romeo and Juliet Overture-Fantasy, exploring how Eastern and Western cultures musically depict the 'star-crossed lovers' archetype. Drawing on Confucian principles, the concerto employs restrained expression rooted in ornamentation of ancient Chinese instruments, while placing the soloist in dialogue with individuals in the ensemble. Along with its fantasy structure, it reflects the Eastern ideal of love as a relational duty, ultimately part of a larger cosmic order. Conversely, Tchaikovsky's overture-fantasy, utilizing a modified sonata-allegro format, features rich orchestration centered on the conflict between love and strife, framing love as an all-consuming force inherently at war with societal boundaries. Ultimately, love in the Western ideal finds its legitimacy through its destruction. Building upon Denis de Rougemont and Isaiah Berlin, this analysis argues that these compositional choices musically embody Eastern and Western conceptions of love, making the differences already established through cultural and literary analysis something felt rather than only argued.

INTRODUCTION

The story of two young lovers, separated by the world and united only in death, is a story shared by dozens of cultures. It is one of the oldest narrative tropes in storytelling, yet its portrayal varies profoundly across cultures, revealing significant insights about their beliefs regarding the social order. Two of the most celebrated examples of this archetype are the Chinese legend of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai, known as *Liang Zhu* or the Butterfly Lovers, and Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Both follow two young lovers whose bond the social world surrounding them makes impossible. Both end in the lovers' deaths. The conclusions of each story, stemming from the same shared tragedy, could not be more different: one ends in transformation while the other in grief. This difference would be encoded into remarkable music by two composers, separated by several decades and several thousand miles.

Liang Zhu is set in the Eastern Jin Dynasty, in a time when women did not usually attend school. Zhu Yingtai, the only daughter of a wealthy noble family, disguises herself as a young man to attend school. During her studies, she meets scholar Liang Shanbo and the two form an immediate bond, taking an oath of fraternity. As they study and live together, Zhu falls in love with Liang, who fails to recognize her femininity. When Zhu's father summons her home, she departs, eventually convincing Liang to propose to her 'sister'. Months later, when Liang visits and discovers Zhu is a woman, the two confess their love and plan to marry. Their reunion is short-lived, as Zhu's father has already arranged her marriage to Ma Wencai, a wealthy merchant from a rival family. Heartbroken, Liang's health deteriorates and he dies. On the day of Zhu's wedding, mysterious winds prevent the procession from passing Liang's grave. Zhu leaves the party to pay her respects, and the grave opens with a clap of thunder. Without hesitating, she throws herself in to join her lover, and their spirits emerge as a pair of butterflies, never to be separated again (Dingmin 2025).

The *Butterfly Lovers' Violin Concerto*, composed in 1958 by Chen Gang and He Zhanhao, translates this legend into the language of the Western symphony orchestra. Chen Gang, born in Shanghai in 1935 entered the Shanghai Conservatory in 1955. In 1959, the government department overseeing the Conservatory sought to present a musical gift to the People's Republic of China for its tenth anniversary (Zhang 2021: 9). Chen Gang was selected to collaborate with fellow student He Zhanhao, a recently accepted student (Chien 2014: 5).

The two composers, as part of an experimental team formed to nationalize the violin with Chinese folk music, proposed three compositional options: a piece about fighting, one about steel making, and one based on the Butterfly Lovers legend (Jia 2015). The third idea was approved.

Earlier, He Zhanhao wrote a string quartet based on the legend, with motifs taken from Shaoxing opera. Adapting the quartet into concerto form, Chen orchestrated many of He's melodies. Chen's contributions extended beyond orchestration as well, writing the violin cadenzas. The concerto was premiered in 1959, with violinist Yu Lina performing it twice that evening, engraving the piece into the Chinese orchestral pantheon (Colville 2021).

Romeo and Juliet begins in the city of Verona, where two rival families—the Montagues and Capulets—are engaged in a bitter feud. At a Capulet feast, Romeo and Juliet discover each other, fall in love, and secretly marry with the assistance of Friar Lawrence. Their happiness is cut short when Romeo, drawn into a street brawl, kills Juliet's cousin Tybalt and is banished. The Friar devises a plan for Juliet to fake her death, allowing her to escape her father's planned marriage for her and reunite with Romeo. When the warning message fails to reach Romeo, he believes her to be dead and commits suicide at her tomb. Juliet, awakening to her dead lover, takes her own life. Their deaths bring the feuding families to peace, and they vow to create monuments in the lovers' memory (Shakespeare 2004).

Russian composer Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky composed his *Romeo and Juliet Overture-Fantasy* across three distinct versions spanning more than a decade. Composer Mily Balakirev had suggested the subject

to Tchaikovsky, providing him with outlines and guidance from his own 1861 overture for Shakespeare's *King Lear* (Rhode Island Philharmonic Orchestra & Music School 2020, St. Louis Symphony Orchestra 2025). After two rounds of premieres and revisions, it was premiered in April 1886. This final version has become one of the most celebrated works in the orchestral repertoire. Its three themes—the Friar's chorale, the violent strife theme, and the soaring love theme—are among the most recognizable melodies in the orchestral canon.

Chen Gang and He Zhanhao's *Butterfly Lovers' Violin Concerto* and Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet Overture-Fantasy* do more than rearticulate the stories on which they are based. Read against the Confucian and Romantic traditions each composer inherited, the pieces give musical form to two fundamentally different views on love. Chen renders the subtle and indirect Eastern expression of love, where actions matter more than proclamations, while Tchaikovsky sees love as an all-encompassing force locked in irreconcilable conflict with the world around it. Together, these works offer a way of feeling how Eastern and Western cultures imagine what it means to be human.

This analysis treats musical meaning as interpretative, rather than self-evident. Following Lawrence Kramer, a work's ties to a literary source do not fix its meaning (Kramer 1990: 6). Such connections invite the interpreter to find meaning in the details of the music's own expressive gestures. The analyses that follow are accordingly grounded in the cultural frameworks established in the Cultural Context section—Confucian and Romantic conceptions of love—and are not a literal transcription of *Romeo and Juliet* or *Liang Zhu* into sound. Where a compositional choice cannot be traced back to anything the source text requires, the choice is treated as independent evidence of the composer's own cultural assumptions, rather than as a retelling of the story.

CULTURAL CONTEXT

Eastern Confucian cultural values in context

In the Eastern tradition, love exists not as an expression of the individual, but as the web of relationships surrounding the individual. Drawing from Confucian texts, the self is fundamentally a relational figure defined by its various connections to others. Tu Weiming states in his 1985 collection of essays *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation*: 'the self as the centre of relationships has always been the focus of Confucian learning. One's ability to harmonize human relations does indeed indicate one's self-cultivation…Self-cultivation is a precondition for harmonizing human relations' (1985: 55). Self-cultivation acts as a way to better serve one's relationships. This means love is always oriented outward, rather than inward toward the self. In fact, its principal obligation is filial piety, outlined in the Confucian treatise *Classic of Filial Piety* (*Xiaojing*): 'filial piety is the root of all virtue, and the stem out of which grows all moral teaching' (2010: 10). Acting in a manner that places personal desire above obligations owed to parents and one's superiors, is condemned: 'he who does not love his parents, but loves other men, is called a rebel against virtue' (2010: 17). Romantic love that defies familial obligation is seen as a breach against the fundamental order of virtue.

Love's vast obligations mean its expression remains consistently under restraint. The Confucian tradition restricts feeling by social context, with the degree of allowed expression proportionate to one's position. But, Tu Weiming reframes this restriction as a moral achievement, stating that 'human beings… maintain that all forms of social interaction are laden with moral implications…self-cultivation is required to harmonize each one of them' (Tu 1985: 56). Tu argues that restraints on expression are necessary to fully realize one's personal virtues.

But, this does not mean Eastern love lacks conflict. The nature of this conflict, though, is different from its Western parallel, where love often sees the individual in conflict with its surrounding world. Eastern love views conflict as an internal fight with one's duality. Ultimately, Eastern conflict arises from the dilemma of personal desire and social obligation, since both cannot be honoured simultaneously. Violation of these heaven-derived obligations thus carries extreme consequences, creating a bisected individual. Sookja Cho points this out in her book *Transforming Gender & Emotion*, where she explores 'the innately conflicting themes of emotional desire and relational obligation as essential factors in the [Butterfly Lovers]'s success' (2018: 8).

These competing obligations explain Eastern societies' prioritization of social harmony and compromise over individual fulfillment. The *Xiaojing* asserts that '[children] serve their fathers…not failing in this loyalty and obedience…they are then able to preserve their emoluments and positions' (2010: 13). The compromise in filial piety is further explored by Hagop Sarkissian in his analysis of authoritarian filial piety: oppressing one's personal wishes in order to comply with parental demands, regardless of feeling (2023: 12). Tu Weiming grounds the suppression of personal desire, noting that personal desire is a form of moral failure: 'learning to become a great man 'consists entirely in getting rid of the obscuration of selfish desires in order by his own efforts to make manifest his clear character' (1985: 31). Eastern tradition views the lover who sacrifices his personal desires for social harmony as one who has achieved higher moral clarity.

But, Eastern love still finds a way to exist, transcending its limitations. Frédéric Wang, in his study of ancient Chinese literature, identifies a distinction for death-transcending bonds. Wang writes, '[Zhang] considers [Fan] to be his friend in life and death (siyou), as opposed to his friends in this world (shengyou)...the bond between the siyou lasts beyond life' (2024: 524), describing the *Book of Later Han*, a 5th century documentation of 3rd century China. Ideas like this, present for nearly two millennia in Chinese literature, show the deep cultural understanding of human bonds surpassing mortal bounds. Wang concludes that 'death, rather than interrupting the bond, strengthens it further. Isn't the most beautiful friendship experienced beyond life?' (2024: 530). Thus, Eastern love finds in death what it couldn't attain in life: unrestricted connection.

Though this analysis draws on these Confucian ideals as a theoretical framework for understanding Eastern conceptions about love, we should acknowledge that lived experience across Chinese society, and

East Asia in general, was more varied and complex than can be captured in any singular philosophical model.

Western Romantic cultural values in context

At the heart of Western love lies the individual—Western Romantic tradition identifies the origin of love as rooted entirely in the self. Isaiah Berlin, in *The Roots of Romanticism*, identifies this as the movement's defining postulate: 'the only thing which is worthwhile…is the exfoliation of a particular self' (2013: 109). Love acts as a bold form of self-expression rather than a service to fulfil the societal expectations around oneself. Cultural theorist Denis De Rougemont reinforces this in his 1939 book *Love in the Western World*, stating '[Tristan and Iseult, two characters from Western mythos,] love one another, but each loves the other from the standpoint of self and not from the other's standpoint. Their unhappiness thus originates in false reciprocity, which disguises a twin narcissism' (1983: 52). By relating love to narcissism, de Rougemont argues that the individual heart is the ultimate authority in love.

This self-authorization carries a powerful urge for declaration of the same intensity. For the Western romantic, love that remains hidden is never fully realized. Berlin notes that 'to live is to do something, to do is to express your nature…This is the unending *Sehnsucht*' (2013: 122). *Sehnsucht*, a German word describing feelings of never-ending yearning and desire, explains 'why we travel to the East and write novels about the past' and 'why we indulge in all manner of fantasies', says Berlin. Western romanticism sees love as a constant pursuit of declaration, for satisfaction is not enough for its existence.

However, it is this outward desire that grants Western love its instability. De Rougemont traces love from the 12th century myth of Tristan and Iseult to modern Romanticism, arguing that the defining feature of Western love is its obstacles: 'Happy love has no history,' he explains, 'romance only comes into existence where love is fatal' (1983: 15). Through Tristan and Iseult, de Rougemont explains that both are aware that obstructions serve to intensify and legitimize love (1983: 41).

Love and the social world are intransigently opposed. This structural conflict is furthered by the totalizing nature of Western passion itself: '[love operates] wherever passion is dreamed of as an ideal instead of being feared like a malignant fever… [swooping] upon powerless and ravished men and women in order to consume them in a pure flame' (De Rougemont 1983: 24). Love is an absolute, a force that sees no authority other than itself and submits to no social framework.

The all-consuming nature of love is exactly what leaves it vulnerable: 'Why does Western Man wish to suffer this passion which lacerates him and which all his common sense rejects?...The answer is that he reaches self-awareness and tests himself only by risking his life' (De Rougemont 1983: 51). De Rougemont reveals that the Western lover understands that the same qualities that make love feel the most alive are the same qualities that make it unsustainable. Loving in the Western tradition is a sacrifice that the romantics understood brought about destruction: a small price to pay for love's authenticity.

This is why Western love, unlike other cultural traditions, does not evolve past its end. As de Rougemont explains, 'the lovers have never had but one desire—the desire for death!' (1983: 46). Death is not an interruption to Western romanticism; rather, it is the destination. Berlin observes that many of the great Romantic characters face this fate: 'Werther died quite uselessly. René in Chateaubriand's story of the same name dies quite uselessly…because they [both] belong to a society which is incapable of making use of them' (Berlin 2013: 95). Western romanticism provides no framework after death because the lover who loved with all their authenticity, destroyed by their own passion, is Western Romanticism's greatest accomplishment; the destruction is the ultimate proof of love's existence.

The Western Romantic conception of love described above represents only a framework rather than a uniform description of Western cultural values. As understood across Western societies, love was incredibly varied and more complex than any single model can capture. Nevertheless, the Romantic tradition's emphasis on love in art, literature, and music makes it the dominant lens through which Western composers expressed and understood love.

A listener working from a different cultural framework might draw other meanings from the same compositional choices discussed below. No single reading of a musical gesture can claim to be the only one available, nor the right one. The analyses that follow are anchored specifically in the Confucian and Romantic frameworks outlined, rather than presented as an interpretation with no traceable basis.

CHEN GANG AND HE ZHANHAO'S BUTTERFLY LOVERS' VIOLIN CONCERTO

Musical analysis of Liang Zhu

First movement - introduction and love theme

The *Butterfly Lovers' Violin Concerto* begins with the strings and harp laying a bed of perfect fifths: hollow intervals with no inherent major or minor tonality, creating a vast and expansive setting. Above, a lone flute—imitating the dizi, a Chinese bamboo flute—performs a fluttering cadenza, meandering between octaves before finally settling on a high D. The oboe and violas then begin a dialogue of imitation, representing the two lovers: Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai.

Zhu Yingtai's voice gets taken over by the soloist, entering with a tender melody based on the Eastern pentatonic scale. Unlike the seven-note diatonic scale, the pentatonic scale omits the fourth and seventh, removing nearly all dissonant intervals, allowing this love theme to exist in a seemingly conflict-free world. Though the pentatonic scale had been commonly used in Chinese media for thousands of years, nothing in the *Liang Zhu* legend explicitly calls for this sound; the choice to encode Zhu's love as a scale nearly free of dissonance is Chen's own, revealing the assumption about what harmonious love should sound like.

Throughout this, the string section plucks repeated rhythmic motifs, giving the sensation of a forever rising theme. As the phrase ends, the cellos take over the love theme, representing Liang Shanbo. Now, the solo violin supports, playing chordal figures originally introduced in the introduction, before assuming the main theme. After peaking, the violin's phrase speeds up, building tension.

Where most would expect a dramatic proclamation of the main theme, the violin takes a step back, finishing only in a *mezzo forte* dynamic. Now, the orchestra plays the theme while the soloist enters and exits the ensemble, ultimately deciding to play and blend in with the orchestral violins. The solo violin is not emphasized more than any of the other players in the section, creating a sort of 'collective soli'. The phrase ends with the flute picking up fragments of the melody, introducing the soloist's last cadenza for the movement.

As the only player on stage playing, the solo violin is exposed and intimate. Everyone else has left, allowing the solo violin to deliver a soliloquy. The cadenza ends with a rising figure, resolving in a high held note.

Second movement - childhood

While the first movement expounds the characters and tone of the Butterfly Lovers, the narrative truly begins in the second movement. Playing with springlike energy, the violin bounces about in this movement, expressing the carefreeness of Liang and Zhu's childhood.

Later, the orchestra takes over, playing the carefree theme while the violin plays underneath, eager for its turn to take the theme. This eventually arrives and the movement ends, though not in triumph. Instead players drop out and the tempo slows down. *Meno mosso* markings, literally meaning less motion, drag the tempo out as Liang and Zhu's school days come to a close. For the first time, the piece acknowledges the limits of the social order: the lovers' childhood is ending, and they must re-enter the world, one which ultimately separates them.

Third movement - parting

The third movement represents the ending of their school years. As the two realize that their time together is coming to a close, they lament their goodbyes and part in a gut-wrenching passage.

Marked *adagio assai doloroso*, the solo violin plays a slow and sorrowful version of the love melody from the first movement. Full of glissandi and drawn-out shifts, the violin mimics a sobbing human voice that struggles to articulate its thoughts. The weeping soloist cries out, unwilling to let go of her lover, in a section marked *poco agitato*.

Fragments of the theme repeat in various octaves before the solo violin cries out one final time. However, it is now joined by the principal cellist, the voice of Liang Shanbo. The two instruments dialogue over a soft tremolo, the cello imitating the violin. Eventually, they part, bringing the shortest movement of the piece to a close.

Fourth movement - conflict

In contrast to the gentle third movement, the fourth movement begins with urgency. A repeated arpeggiated motif in the lower strings exchanges with the winds and the section gains momentum. The orchestra becomes a motor, pushing the music forward with *fortissimo* triplet eighth notes. Tension rises as more players enter; eventually, the solo violin bursts in with rapid, aggressive chords, marked *recitando elevato*. The marking directs the soloist to play in an elevated declaratory manner, as if narrating a grand theatrical story.

The soloist darts around the instrument until, after more chords, the ensemble interjects with two lengthy *forte* quarter notes. Mimicking the voice of Zhu Yingtai in protest of her father's decisions for her arranged marriage, the violinist cries out, fighting against the force of the entire ensemble. It's played in a free tempo—a mini cadenza—with no clear definition of the beat. As a result, it's one of the few moments of intense emotional expression in the entire piece. A slow portamento slide, explicitly written into the score as 'used to convey bitter anguish and deep grief', directs the violin to end the section.

Then, the violinist begins a syncopated motif imitating the *guzheng*, a Chinese sixteen-stringed zither, with the orchestra doubling the violin's dramatic syncopated hits. Finally, the violin resolves onto a theme with the same contour as the first movement's main melody. The flutes and strings ride high above the clarinets, bassoon, and horns, developing a rich texture: quadruplets against triplets. For the first time in the entire piece, the music features a wild *fortissimo* dynamic with complete orchestration.

After the soloist finishes, the winds and strings join, recalling melodic fragments from the movement. It ends in a breathtaking *fortississimo* dynamic, one level louder than the highest used so far.

Fifth movement - reunion

The fifth movement is marked *lagrimoso*, mournful or sorrowful, depicting the reunion of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai, where Liang realizes his partner's true gender and also falls in love.

Zhu begins the movement in a slow slide of a minor third, indicating 'tearful complaints', as the score notes. The flute plays in tandem with the violin, foreshadowing the entrance of Liang: the principal cellist. He continues the violin's theme, while the solo violin decorates the melody with a soprano countermelody. The lovers play a duet, exchanging the same material yet always remaining out of sync. It is only in the last four beats of the movement, where they finally match, playing the same semitone portamento slide. This motion, borrowed from the *erhu's mo-yin* technique, simulates the couple's weeping, as Zhu leaves to marry her wealthy suitor.

Sixth movement - Tragedy

The wedding between Ma and Zhu commences with the strings and winds, like horses drawing carts, carrying a repeated pattern of moving *staccato* eighth notes. Elsewhere, Liang Shanbo, who is now portrayed by the solo violin, learns of his love's betrothal.

Furious, he dives into a brilliant passage of chords, sliding portamento notes, and *bariolage*, turning the violin into a one-man-army of sound. In a dramatic crescendo and accelerando, the music culminates in a semitone slide and *fortissimo* cadence, marking Liang Shanbo's death.

Without wasting a single moment, the orchestra dives into another ensemble-wide run. The slower melodies merge with a new percussive melody, like that of the fourth movement. The tempo picks up with more *bariolage*, bringing the music to a dramatic climax when, all of a sudden, it goes quiet.

The soloist, in a final cadenza, slides its way up the register in a fit of rage, ending with an abrupt high note; lightning strikes Liang's grave and Zhu leaps in, seeking an eternity with her lover. The orchestra finishes the movement, synthesizing both fast and slow themes until a lone flute eventually rises.

Seventh movement - Transformation coda
The flute begins, playing the beginning cadenza, almost as if the concerto is starting over. The first violins begin the love melody. The muted texture of the violins creates a softer, calmer tone, mellowing down the drama of the prior music.

The solo violin enters, also muted, playing the same melody. Since both lovers are dead, the soloist is purely the embodiment of love, remaining long past the mortal limits of our fated protagonists.

The winds drop out, one by one, shrinking the ensemble until it is only the solo violin, piano, and strings. The soloist plays a repeated trilled figure: fingers fluttering like a butterfly. A final variation of the main theme begins, blending the orchestra into one powerful unit.

The solo violin finishes with a final cadenza, soaring high until it is joined by the flute and strings: Liang Shanbo. The piece ends with the lovers discovering what they wanted all along: love, in life or death.

Cultural analysis of the Butterfly Lovers' Violin Concerto

The structure of the concerto
Despite its title as a violin concerto, the Butterfly Lovers' Violin Concerto does not strictly follow the standard concerto's structural traditions, which typically organize the emotional and dramatic content into three movements, each with contrasting character and tempi. In fact, the concerto does not follow any predetermined formal architecture. Chen Gang and He Zhanhao instead use a fantasy structure, split into seven narrative sections.

In fact, many of the sections of the concerto can be thought of and played as independent movements, such as movements one to three and four to five. The sudden re-emergences of the music subvert the standard classical audience's expectation of where the music should end, musically representing the Eastern ideal of things continuing on beyond their 'set' end. Nothing in the legend calls for this structural

restlessness; it is Chen and He's own choice to build continuation into the music's shape and, independently of the story, giving way to their own interpretations of Eastern ideals.

The freedom of the fantasy allows for the recollection of themes as an emotional memory. The seventh movement, the coda, represents the literal transformation of the lovers, departing from the conventional recapitulation. The opening and closing movements share the same material only out of respect to the story, as after all, the piece is programmatic. The butterfly metamorphosis represents the completion of the idea that began in the first bars of the piece. This cyclical logic reflects the Eastern understanding Tu Weiming describes as the continuity of being: the belief that all things participate in a larger process of transformation, rather than following a linear path.

The lack of formal restrictions allows Chen to manipulate certain movements to emphasize particular values. The conciseness of the third movement, the parting scene, for example, is a particularly revealing choice. While Western Romanticism might linger in the grief of separation, Chen Gang gives it the least space of any movement: not even 50 measures of music. This restraint is due to Confucian tradition. Tu Weiming observes that the authentic manifestation of the human will is seen through self-transformation and growth, not prolonged expression. Grief in the Eastern tradition is absorbed and processed, then let go—not to be carried further than necessary. The shortness of the third movement, however, does not diminish the emotional impact of this scene. Instead, it provides cultural context to the music.

The duality of tenderness and virtuosity

Throughout the concerto, Chen Gang alternates between two clear emotional registers: tenderness and virtuosity. Beginning with a lyrical melody in the first movement, Chen writes for long lines that bleed into the next. The articulations in this section are smooth, with slurs and slides all indicating tenderness. Every other movement, starting with the second, includes some sort of virtuosic passage, whether it be runs, complicated shifts, *spiccato*, or massive blocked chords. These passages all align with dramatic plot points, such as Zhu Yingtai's conflict with her father or the deaths of both lovers. As a result, the soloist represents these same hardships in their physical movement.

These shifts in musical temperament reflect the emotional terrain of Eastern love. Eastern love is culturally restricted by individuals' ties to others and remains contained, repressed in its expression. The lyrical passages represent love in its natural state, or at least love's attempts of self-sustenance within its constraints. The virtuosic passages, on the other hand, represent the constant intrusions and impositions—the arranged marriage and death—that forbid the full expression of love. However, love continues to return, in the third, fifth, and seventh movements. Unlike the conflict themes, the love theme slides in effortlessly, without a dramatic chord or run proclaiming its existence. This reflects the interconnectedness of love with the characters: no matter what happens, that feeling will always remain.

The role of ornamentation

The violin's use of ornamentation is a particularly defining characteristic of the concerto. Specific ornaments—slides of a minor third or minor second—despite their prevalence in this concerto, are not

common outside of Eastern pieces. This is due to their inherent nature as impressions of Eastern instruments such as the *erhu*, *guzheng*, and *pipa.*

Moreover, the broader use of ornamentation is the composers' way of highlighting important melodic sections. Glissandi often appear in the concerto's main theme or dramatic moments: the parting scene, the conflict in the fourth movement, and the death scene. Minor third slides in the main love theme are used to outline the feelings of longing and desire between the protagonists. At the most fundamental level, the slide delays the arrival of a note by a fraction of a second: barely noticeable, yet it builds anticipation. It also mimics the human voice's inaccuracies, as singing often leads to micro-slides around notes. In other cases, the glissandi reflects sobbing and straining, such as in the fifth movement's theme.

In the Eastern tradition, love is denoted as how one endures and carries it, not through dramatic proclamation. Ornamentation in the concerto serves as the musical embodiment of the principle: subtle enough so as to not disturb, but present to convey love.

The role of dialogue

The most structurally significant reflection of Eastern values in the concerto is the ongoing relationship between the solo violin and the ensemble. In most Western concerti, the soloist is understood as the distinct individual voice, while the orchestra plays only a supporting role. However, the Butterfly Lovers subverts this dynamic. The ensemble, in this concerto, is just as important as the soloist.

The orchestra serves as the indicator of society, laying out the bounds of the world the soloist inhabits. As a result, the two constantly debate, the violin questioning the limits of expression while the orchestra responds. Even in Zhu Yingtai's most exposed moments, cadenzas, free tempo improvisatory phrases, blocked chords, the orchestra remains present, providing a base of chords or tremolo upon which the solo violin plays.

However, the orchestra plays another important role: Liang Shanbo. Liang's voice is captured mainly through the principal cellist. But, he is not confined to the cellists; Liang's voice moves often, from the violas to the oboes to the flutes. His voice has no fixed tether because he doesn't represent Liang Shanbo the person; the voice represents the relationship between Zhu and Liang. As Eastern tradition outlines, love does not focus on the individual but rather how the individual relates to those around them.

Restricted orchestration and its reflection on expression

Throughout the concerto, the solo violin carries the primary voice of love. Crucially, it stays there. Unlike prominent love passages in Khachaturian's *Spartacus and Phrygia* or Wagner's *Liebestod*, the love theme in the Butterfly Lovers remains contained almost exclusively within the violin sections, solo and orchestral. This containment reflects the Eastern tradition's emphasis on limited romantic expression and more subtle ways of showing love, like ornamentation. However, the containment of love into such a small section is also a deliberate compositional choice by Chen, setting up a dramatic contrast in the fourth movement: one that can be interpreted as out of place.

In the fourth movement, Chen abandons the intimate relational writing of the previous passages and opts for a full orchestral climax: *fortissimo dynamics*, cross-rhythmic texturing, and violent displays of emotion in the solo violin. These features place this passage closer to Western Romantic orchestration than to that of the Eastern. This departure, though, is not without reason. This moment in the piece represents Zhu Yingtai's confrontation with her father over the arranged marriage, the moment where the social order antagonizes the desires of the protagonist. The conflict has shifted from internal conflict over conflicting moral obligations to active rebellion against an antagonist seeking to stop one's plans. Chen's choice to adopt the language of Western Romanticism shows Eastern traditions' inability to deal with such violent impositions, and that they must be swapped out, temporarily, for a stronger, more passionate vocabulary. This shift is only temporary, as in the fifth movement, the restraint returns, as quickly as it departed.

Beyond this single departure, the orchestra's broader relationship to the solo voice tells a more nuanced story about the social world the lovers inhabit. When both lovers are present, the ensemble assumes a supportive role by outlining harmonies and echoing melodic fragments. But, when the lovers are absent or overpowered, such as during the wedding procession or when both have died, the orchestra shifts to center stage, collectively bearing down as the embodiment of governing force. The orchestra's role works inverse to the presence of love: when love is suppressed, the social order expands to fill every space that love has vacated. Altogether, the orchestra's role is almost enough to tell the story of the lovers. It's an indicator of how much the world, at any given moment, is tolerant of love.

Significance of the transcendental coda

The concerto's final movement serves as the utmost expression of the Eastern view of life after death. Though past movements depicted love as contested and destroyed, the coda suggests that none of that was permanent. The flute's return, playing the same free cadenza that opened the piece, signals a new beginning, as if the concerto's entire emotional journey has been revitalized. Both lovers are now dead, yet the muted violin plays on with haunting beauty. Now, love has been liberated from the very social structures that trapped it. The trilled figure, the soloist physically acting out a butterfly, condenses the entire work into a single physical gesture. When the violin rises into its final cadenza, joined by the flute representing Liang, the two are finally able to achieve unity. This resolution reflects the Eastern framework described by Tu Weiming: the continuity of being, in which love transcends the limits of the mortal world.

TCHAIKOVSKY'S ROMEO AND JULIET OVERTURE-FANTASY

Musical analysis of Romeo and Juliet

Friar Lawrence's fate theme

Tchaikovsky's Romeo and Juliet begins with a chorale of winds playing a lengthy rising half note passage. This is Friar Lawrence's theme: the 'fate' theme. Marked *andante non tanto quasi moderato*, or

'walking tempo, but not too much so, almost at a moderate speed', the winds play in unison a chilling melody. The theme reaches its first climax at a mere *mezzo-forte* f-minor chord as the harp joins in playing accompanying inversions of the tonic chord.

Tchaikovsky continues the theme, now with a pizzicato accompaniment in the strings, creating a light and lofty mood. The woodwinds continue the melody in unison, repeating the same thematic material. The strings and winds then switch roles, with the oboe and bassoon joining the viola in their descending sequential pattern of thirds; the upper strings continue the meandering melody, crescendoing up until another *mezzo-forte* climax. As the fate theme comes to a close, Tchaikovsky writes *poco a poco stringendo*, accelerating the tempo to *allegro*, fast and brisk speed: a stark contrast to the friar's theme.

The chorale of the winds in the beginning resembles a Gregorian chant, featuring unison movement of voices without an accompaniment. Often featuring verses from the Bible, Gregorian chants are associated with the church, setting a religious context for the entire piece. The theme sets up the structure in which we interpret all later themes; the Church is the authority and comes before everything else.

Another interesting detail is the lack of an audible meter. While Tchaikovsky writes a time signature, 4/4, the slow tempo and longer-length notes make the music feel like there is no structured beat or pulse. As a result, it feels perpetual and timeless, evoking feelings of the divine, as if surpassing the mortal need for explicit structure and purpose. Reflecting the moral and social order of the play, the music feels as if it both predates and will outlast humanity. The stepwise motion in the theme further grounds the music: without large leaps between notes, the melody feels restrained and collected, giving it a sense of solemnity and gravity that reflect the structure of the religious world.

The strife theme

The serenity of Friar Lawrence's theme shatters as the orchestra both accelerates and crescendoes into an *allegro giusto* tempo, marking the beginning of the 'strife' theme. Like the fate theme, the entire ensemble plays the strife theme in unison. This theme represents the conflict between the two families, Montagues and Capulets. Tchaikovsky writes *forte*, followed by a snappy rhythm of two sixteenth notes and an eight note. This percussive rhythm mirrors the jabbing of swords, creating an aggressive and violent atmosphere.

The strings continue the hostile theme as they alternate between rising and falling scale passages, creating another kind of 'sword jab'.

Eventually, Tchaikovsky begins the second section of the strife theme.

Now, the strings repeat rapid meandering scales, mimicking the stampede of an army. While the strings climb, the woodwinds play accented hits on the second and and-of-third beats. The timpani joins as well, marking the first entrance of percussion in the entire overture-fantasy thus far. The repeated hits continue to evoke images of swords, striking and thrusting into the ears of the listener. The initial strife passage

returns with the entire orchestra blasting at *fortissimo* dynamic, the loudest the overture has been so far. The violins and flutes break into the rising scale passage, before trading it to the low strings and bassoons, who invert the run. The orchestra reunites, playing one final instance of the sixteenth note rhythm.

On the surface, the strife theme represents the physical conflict between the Montagues and Capulets; the rhythmic intensity and incisiveness represent the altercations: namely Tybalt vs. Mercutio and Romeo vs. Tybalt. However, the strife theme's significance extends beyond a mere physical violence, representing the conflict that plagues the world in which the star-crossed lovers exist.

The strife theme's reunification can be interpreted as the collective conflict that plagues the characters. It seeks to stop other ideas, social and moral law, from flourishing. Building on the foundation of the fate theme, strife creates hostility and chaos that makes the emergence of love unlikely; yet, when love ultimately arises, it is rich with emotional depth and courage.

The love theme

The love theme first emerges with the English horn and muted violas. Tchaikovsky characterizes it as tender, full of intimacy and care. Beginning on the dominant of the scale, he writes a minor sixth, bringing us to the seventh, or leading tone. These first two notes, the seven and the five beg for resolution. As the melody continues, the small ensemble plays a sequence of three rising notes, each beckoning the music closer and closer till it finally resolves.

The upper strings, in response to a harp arpeggio, play a repeated passage of *pianissimo* chords, shimmering in the tranquility of the scene. They create a glass-like texture—an illusion that even the simplest *forte* breaks. The lower strings join in, still muted, adding sustenance till the mirage is a mirage no longer. The winds, in a chromatic run, bring us back to the love theme, where it is accompanied by the bell-like ring of the French horns. Built on the foundation of an unresolved note, the love theme tricks the listener, teetering on the edge of resolution before modulating and continuing the line. Above a sea of harp and strings, the English horn and bassoon echo fragments of the love theme before it is taken over by a familiar face: the strife theme.

Conflict between themes

The strife rhythm, two sixteenth notes and an eighth note, is struck out in the strings, this time with the mutes removed, returning back to the intensity and vigour of the prior section. However, Tchaikovsky introduces more melodic material; while the strings, playing yet another sixteenth note passage, whirl around, the horns call out a *marcato* theme resembling that of the friar's. However, the character is much different. Rather than establishing a religious undertone, it resembles that of a military fanfare, as if to announce 'the army has arrived'.

This horn call doesn't last long, as it's interrupted by the woodwinds, striking out the strife rhythm. The two themes, fate and strife, battle. In the end, the strife theme emerges victorious. Nearing the climax of the theme, Tchaikovsky writes *fortissimo*, creating a near exact replica of the theme's prior occurrence.

Just as quick as the music climaxes, it calms down, replaced by the shimmering string pattern, which is now played in the clarinets. The pattern picks up more and more players: the flutes, horns, bassoon, until it reaches the emotional climax of the entire overture: the love theme. Played by all members of the orchestra the melody sings, enjoying their momentary victory.

It's then passed to the cellos, before ending up in the horns and winds. It appears like Tchaikovsky has written yet another emotional peak, another triumph for the love theme. However, it's abruptly displaced, usurped by the return of strife. Love fights, gaining back a measure or two of serenity, until it's defeated by the strife theme, once and for all.

Strife continues at full blast, cymbals and percussion slamming out hits on nearly every beat, painting an incredible image of the Veronian conflict. The violins, in one last ditch effort, play a morphed and twisted version of the love theme. Though, something is off. Rather than the heart-wrenching elision of the authentic love theme, it resolves in a matter of two measures.

A chorale of winds signals the coda of the piece. Like the friar's theme, they play in unison. However, the monophony has been transformed from the structure of the Church to a funeral procession. The strings call out the love theme one final time, though in a slower tempo. It lacks the passion and fight of prior instances, feeling more like an epilogue in remembrance of the lovers.

Four bars from the end, the strife rhythm makes a final appearance, mocking the love theme and proclaiming its victory. The orchestra strikes in unison, finishing the piece on a note of triumph: strife's victory.

Cultural analysis of Romeo and Juliet

Sonata-allegro structure

Tchaikovsky's overture has a unique form. The standard at the time, Sonata-allegro form, was characterized by an exposition where two main themes are introduced, a development where the themes are expanded upon, and a recapitulation where the themes are brought back.

Tchaikovsky expanded upon this format by appending an introduction section: Friar Lawrence's theme. By introducing the first theme of the piece before the formal structure begins, Tchaikovsky establishes the idea of fate and morality as something that precedes the world: something that has existed before and will continue to outlast society. It is only once this idea of moral continuity has been established that Tchaikovsky is able to properly tell his story.

The exposition begins with the strife theme, preparing a contrast between it and the second theme: love. Textures in the themes—strife being jagged and percussive, while love is smooth and connected—allows for greater division within the exposition.

The development section, the least formally defined of the three, serves as a free-for-all battleground where themes clash without prescribed rules.

In standard sonata-allegro form, the recapitulation section connects the two themes of the exposition. While the exposition had one theme written in the tonic key and another written in the dominant key, the recapitulation replays them in the same key, thus reuniting them and providing a sense of closure to the piece. Tchaikovsky plays into this at first, writing both sections in B minor. However, he subverts this as love and strife do not coexist or reunite. Instead, love is beaten down, annihilated by its counterpart. The strife theme returns with a fury never seen before, shutting down any prospects of love the music had hoped for. In the same way that he expanded the beginning with an introduction, Tchaikovsky wrote a coda section. Here, the love theme almost makes a return, yet it is ultimately shut out by one final stampede of strife.

Moreover, Tchaikovsky's alteration of sonata-allegro form proves the inevitability of conflict and the impossibility of love's victory. While sonata-allegro form promises resolution to conflict, the overture delivers none.

Conflict between love and strife

The conflict between the love and strife themes drive the overture's central conflict. When the strife theme enters, it shatters the serenity of Friar Lawrence's introduction, shifting the tempo, tone, and texture to establish a world of ever-present conflict. Love and conflict are thus established as fundamental opposites, incapable of fully coexisting with the other, yet unable to eliminate each other. De Rougemont's observation that Western love requires obstacles to sustain itself finds its greatest musical demonstration here: every appearance of the love theme is preceded or followed by the strife theme, for love cannot exist without the conflict that defines it.

The development section makes this dependency even more explicit, as the themes are fragmented and placed back to back, neither able to fully assert itself, yet still feeding off the energy of the other's resistance. However, it is not an equal fight. Every time the strife theme returns, it does so with more players, louder dynamics, and fuller orchestration, while every instance of the love theme becomes more fragile, finding less and less support. By the recapitulation, fighting for survival has exhausted love out of existence. The asymmetry of the themes represents the Western worldview that love's all-out declaration drains it early, leaving nothing when the world uses its full force. Tchaikovsky's writing confirms the fate of love ever since the first *allegro giusto*: love was destined to end in defeat.

SYNTHESIS

These readings, anchored in the Confucian and Romantic frameworks discussed, are also consistent across several independent musical parameters, rather than resting on a single interpretive claim.

Differing portrayals of love

Chen Gang and Tchaikovsky faced the same compositional problem: representing star-crossed lovers via the Western symphonic orchestra. However, their approaches were radically different.

In the violin concerto, love is expressed through containment. The violins almost exclusively carry the love theme, never sharing it with other sections. Nothing in the Liang Zhu legend specifies which instruments should carry the lovers' theme, or how widely it should be shared. Chen and He's decision to keep it almost entirely within the violin section is unprompted, reflecting their own assumption that love belongs to a small circle of voices, rather than the collective.

When love appears, the violin speaks in the ornamented language of the erhu, rather than the nature of the Western violin. In cadenzas, moments of complete transparency for the soloist, the love theme appears its fullest, reaching its most complex expressions. Love in Liang Zhu is only able to expand when in an empty room, never before an audience. The duets between the solo violin and other instruments—principal cello, flute, oboe—are the only moments love expands beyond a single voice, and even then, it expands to two, not to one hundred. The concerto's musical vocabulary for love is one of restraint and sustained intimacy, built on the Confucian principles of the soloist's relationship with individual ensemble members.

Tchaikovsky's representation of love is the precise opposite. The love theme in Romeo and Juliet begins intimately, with only a handful of players, but grows, establishing its first appearance as merely a starting point. It swells until every member of the orchestra plays simultaneously. Love in Romeo and Juliet reaches totality, absorbing the entire orchestra. Shakespeare's text gives no direction on orchestration, since it has none to give; the choice to let the love theme expand until it fills every section is Tchaikovsky's alone, and it is this expansion that stages love as the all-consuming natural force.

While Tchaikovsky uses the collective nature of the western orchestra to fill out every inch of sound space available, Chen uses that same ensemble to foster individual connections, reflecting the fundamentally differing Confucian and Western Romantic worldviews.

Musical relationships

The structural relationship between love and its surrounding musical terrain reveals a deeper cultural divide. In the concerto, the solo violin and orchestra are almost always present together. Even in the 'conflict' movement, where there is greatest tension, the two never fully vacate the same musical space. Zhu's love theme follows this nature, where it is almost always accompanied or played in a duet. This coexistence reflects the Eastern understanding of love's relationship to the social world, in that they are interdependent forces, incapable of existing without each other.

In Romeo and Juliet, the love and strife themes operate on an entirely different principle of mutual exclusion. When one theme is present, the other is absent. When love briefly asserts itself, strife retreats,

only to return and displace it entirely. The two themes do not dialogue. This distinction is present down to the fundamental group of notes the themes use. The strife theme is introduced in B minor while the love theme is in D-flat major. The tonics of each key are not even diatonic in the other, representing an inherent disunion. Tchaikovsky's decision to do this is not reflected anywhere in the original play; convention would have made the pairing relative keys, or at a minimum a shared tonic, not two keys with seemingly no relation. That he chose keys with no common ground instead is a decision made purely on musical terms, and it is that decision, not the play, that renders the Western Romantic worldview: love and the social world are incapable of coexisting.

Chen Gang imagines love and the world as a relationship: complicated and sometimes painful, but ultimately inseparable. Tchaikovsky, on the other hand, imagines them at war.

The purpose of the ending

Both pieces end in death. But, the question each composer asks of that death is different. Tchaikovsky asks: what does death prove about love? His answer, written into strife's mocking final appearance and the love theme's exhausted return, is to prove the legitimacy of love in its destruction. Only something that existed so authentically and truthfully could face that kind of defeat and loss.

Chen Gang asks a different question entirely: where does love go? He answers that love goes somewhere societal rules cannot follow. The purpose of its destruction is to set up the transformation thereafter. Like Tu Weiming describes, nothing truly ends: it only changes form. The coda serves as the answer to a question that Western Romantics never thought to ask.

Placed against each other, these two endings reveal what each culture believes love stories are for. *Romeo and Juliet* lives in the belief that its purpose is to promote unconditional affection, despite whatever social forces are in opposition. If love prevails, it is celebrated; if it is destroyed, it testifies its authenticity.

Liang Zhu, conversely, is a story that believes in the persistence and never-ending nature of love. Even if the mortal world limits Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai's passion, they participate in something larger than themselves, liberating themselves in death. This love story represents the Eastern belief of love's transcendence; fated love does not require the world's permission to survive.

CONCLUSION

Both composers worked within the same medium: the Western symphony orchestra, with its fixed instrumentation and conventions of form. Neither work had access to a harmonic library built for solely Confucian or Romantic ideals; both worked from the same system. Yet, the two pieces diverge on nearly everything: key relationships, orchestration, structure, while still drawing on identical resources, suggesting something beyond the plot steered each composer's hand. Stories, as a whole, can be translated into any number of musical settings without forcing a particular shape; the fact that Chen and

Tchaikovsky each arrived at such different final works from the same available toolkit points to something the texts themselves could not have supplied. This is where music does work that text cannot: a reader can be told, for example, that Eastern and Western conceptions of love differ. They may read Tu Weiming's comments on Confucian restraint of expression, yet hearing the soloist step back into a mezzo-forte dynamic, instead of fortissimo, produces a representation of the work that does not rely on the text at all. With music, the differences between the two sets of ideals become something felt directly, without needing philosophy to explain them.

Chen Gang and He Zhanhao's *Butterfly Lovers' Violin Concerto* and Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet Overture-Fantasy* give musical form to the Eastern Confucian and Western Romantic understandings of love. The concerto's contained ornamented dialogue between soloist and orchestra and the overture's totalizing expansion of love serve as different answers to humanity's most fundamental question: what does it mean to love? Chen Gang's answer, rooted in centuries of Confucian beliefs and the cosmic continuity Tu Weiming describes, is that love will always find its place, even if the world refuses it. Tchaikovsky's answer, anchored by the Western Romantic tradition from Tristan and Iseult onward, is that love finds its completeness in its defeat. Both answers emerge through the music itself.

When the solo violin speaks its cadenzas in the *Butterfly Lovers*, the listener does not need to know Confucian philosophy to feel the freedom from the boundaries of love. When the love theme of *Romeo and Juliet* swells to every corner of a concert hall, the listener does not need de Rougemont to sense the urgent consuming nature of love fighting against a force it cannot survive. The music is its own primary source of these conflicting perspectives. Neither composer set out to compose a treatise on love. They simply set out to tell the story of two lovers.

The assumption that love is universal risks oversimplifying and even incorrectly framing the cultural values that shape them. The *Butterfly Lovers' Violin Concerto* and Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet*, both portraying the same story of the star-crossed lovers, offer two perspectives on what it means to be human, through a medium that surpasses cultural and language barriers. To hear what each actually says is something that words alone—no matter the language—could never fully convey.

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